SPORT

DR Congo upset Nigeria and keep 2026 World Cup dream alive

RABAT: The Democratic Republic of Congo kept alive hopes of a World Cup place as they edged Nigeria 4-3 on penalties after a 1-1 draw at the end of extra time to win the African qualifying playoffs in Morocco on Sunday.

DR Congo now await the draw on Thursday for the inter-confederation playoff in March where six teams will chase two places at the 48-team finals.

Captain Chancel Mbemba converted the decisive kick after Congolese substitute goalkeeper Timothy Fayulu, brought on a minute before the shootout, made two saves in the shootout.

Frank Onyeka had Nigeria ahead in the third minute but Meschack Elia equalised for the two sides to be level 1-1 after extra time.

The mini-tournament in Rabat was for the best runners-up across the nine African qualifying groups, whose fixtures were completed last month with the nine winners automatically booking a berth at the World Cup in Canada, Mexico and the U.S. next year.

Nigeria, who have been to six previous World Cups, were off to a perfect start as the Congolese cleared an early cross but only onto the edge of their penalty area where Onyeka snapped up the ball and powered home an effort, helped into the net by a slight deflection off Axel Tuanzebe.

But the Congolese could have been level within nine minutes had Ngal'ayel Mukau not put his close-in effort over the crossbar after Nigeria goalkeeper Stanley Nwabali had flapped at the ball.

They did equalise in the 32nd minute after Alex Iwobi had been stripped of possession inside the Congolese half, and a quick counter saw Cedric Bakambu square for Elia to score despite the efforts of Nigeria captain Wilfred Ndidi to intercept the ball.

A clever backheel at a corner early in the second half from Bakambu saw Nwabali make a sharp stop, and there looked a decent penalty shout for the Congolese as Noah Sadiki was upended by Benjamin Fredrick in the Nigeria box in the 55th minute, but the referee did not show any interest, and there was no VAR check.

Congo looked more ambitious as the contest wore on, but it was characterised by a wary approach from both sides, keen not to make any mistakes with so much at stake.

Nigeria needed extra time to get past Gabon in their Thursday semi-final and looked much more fatigued than their opponents, who beat Cameroon inside 90 minutes in their semi later the same night.

There were two opportunities in extra time on either end, with Nigerian substitute Tolu Arokodare heading over and then with the last effort of the game, Mbemba had his effort saved by Nwabali.

DR Congo competed at the World Cup in 1974 when the country was still known as Zaire.

Victory qualifies the Congolese for the inter-confederation mini-tournament in Guadalajara and Monterrey from March 23.

The African representatives are the third nation to secure a place after Bolivia and New Caledonia, and the other three slots will be filled on Tuesday for a competition that excludes Europe.

Iraq host the United Arab Emirates in Basra after the first leg of the Asian decider finished 1-1 last Thursday in Abu Dhabi.

Jamaica and Panama are the frontrunners to be the two Central America/Caribbean flagbearers, but Suriname, Curacao, Honduras, Haiti and Costa Rica are other possible qualifiers.

The two highest ranked teams will receive byes into single-match finals while the other four meet in single-match semi-finals. The winners of the two finals go to the World Cup.—Agencies

TIRANA: England captain Harry Kane heads to score against Albania during their 2026 World Cup qualifier at the Air Albania Stadium.—Reuters

Norway reach first World Cup since 1998, force Italy into playoffs

MILAN: Norway qualified for their first World Cup since 1998 after Erling Haaland struck again in a 4-1 thumping of Italy on Sunday which sealed a spot in next summer's finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico and condemned the hosts, who have missed out on the last two editions of the tournament, to the playoffs.

Haaland scored the decisive brace in the space of seconds at a soaking San Siro for Norway, who completed Group 'I' with a perfect 24 points from their eight qualifying matches, six points ahead of four-time World Cup winners Italy, who will compete in the playoffs for the third consecutive occasion.

Norway would have had to lose by nine goals or more in order to be overtaken by Italy for the group's only automatic place for next summer's finals in North America, but Stale Solbakken's side ended their campaign in glorious fashion in front of 70,000 people.

"It is indescribable. It is completely unreal. This is what we have dreamed of and worked for over such a long time. The way we have done it is incredible. It is huge," said Martin Odegaard to Norwegian TV 2.

The injured Arsenal midfielder and usual Norway captain stressed just how much adversity the team has endured after years of painful failed attempts to reach a major tournament.

"We have stood in so much rubbish, so many setbacks. To be here together in this moment means everything. We have had absolute belief and now we are getting the reward. We have fought through so much, and now we stand here with a perfect qualification. It is unreal."

Solbakken was coy as to his powerful team's chances now that a 28-year weight has come to an end.

"Let's see the draw first... I haven't even thought about it. For me, it (tonight) was to go from 99 percent to 100 percent and now we have done it in a great way," Solbakken told reporters. "Let's see what the draw brings before we go into those questions."

Haaland's father Alf-Inge was still an international player when Norway last competed in the World Cup 27 years ago, a tournament won by a Zinedine Zidane-inspired France.

And the Manchester City striker, called a "goal machine" by Solbakken, will be one of the players to watch in North America after smashing in 16 goals during qualifying.

The 25-year-old is averaging more than a goal a game for club and country this season and was typically ruthless when presented with his opportunities to both put Norway ahead and then double their lead in the 78th and 79th minutes.

MILAN: Norway's Erling Haaland (L) scores against Italy during their qualifier at San Siro.—Reuters

Pio Esposito opened the scoring for Italy in the 11th minute, but once Antonio Nusa levelled with a thumping strike in the 63rd minute, there was only one team who looked like winning, and Jorgen Strand Larsen's brilliant individual goal completed the rout in stoppage time.

For Italy, the realisation before kickoff that they were heading for yet another playoff cut deeply as they exited the San Siro field to a hail of whistles from the few home fans who had stayed until the end.

Four years ago, Italy again finished second in their group behind Switzerland and fell in the playoffs, suffering a shock exit to North Macedonia after Aleksandar Trajkovski's stoppage-time strike.

In 2018, they also came second behind Spain in the group and lost their playoff to Sweden 1-0 on aggregate.

Coach Gennaro Gattuso apologised to supporters during his short interview with public broadcaster RAI and was clearly concerned about the second half collapse.

"It's worrying, I'd be a liar to say that it doesn't concern me, because when you have nights like this it's much easier if you can stay together, improve the day to day," said Gattuso. "What worries me is that we'll next see each other in three months' time."

Italy's bid for direct qualification was compromised from their opening match against Norway, a 3-0 defeat which ended Luciano Spalletti's reign as coach.

Since Gattuso took over, the Azzurri have performed better but there is no-one in their team of the class of Haaland, a shame for a country which has produced some of the game's best-ever players.

"We'll find a solution. We want to reach the semi-finals, push through to the final, and earn our place at the World Cup," Gattuso said. "It's a pity, as the first half was very good, we were a real team, but the biggest disappointment is that the second half was not up to those standards."

Israel beat Moldova 4-1 but finished six points adrift of second-placed Italy.

France booked their place in next year's tournament in North America with a win over Ukraine earlier in the week, and a much-changed side concluded their campaign with a 3-1 win in Azerbaijan.

Ukraine saw off Iceland 2-0 thanks to two strikes inside the final 10 minutes from Oleksandr Zubkov and Oleksii Hutsuliak to claim second place in Group 'D'.

Thomas Tuchel's England completed a perfect group-stage performance as they won 2-0 against Albania to finish their campaign with a 100 percent record, featuring 22 goals scored and zero conceded — a European record for a team playing at least six qualifying matches.

"I think it's as good [a squad] as we've ever had," Harry Kane, who scored both England goals, told ITV. "I think when you look at the starting 11, you look at the players coming off the bench, we're going to go into the tournament as one of the favourites."

With Albania already assured of second place, Serbia beat Latvia 2-1 in a dead-rubber in the other Group 'K' match.—Agencies

Asjad fires 142 break as all three Pakistanis advance at World Cup

MUSCAT: Pakistan's Asjad Iqbal compiled a massive 142 break, the tournament's highest so far, to headline the third day of the IBSF Snooker World Cup on Monday, as all three Pakistani players advanced to the last 32 round.

Asjad kept his record perfect as he dominated Malaysian cueist Lim Kok Leong in a 3-0 victory.

He took the first frame 94-12 with a 53 break before producing his stunning 142 clearance to win the second frame 142-0. He sealed the match by taking the third frame 68-31.In contrast, compatriot Mohammad Asif fell 3-1 to India's Aditya Mehta.

Mehta opened with a 77 break to win the first frame 119-5, but Asif responded by taking the second frame 82-5 with a 55-break.

The Indian player then sealed victory by winning the next two frames, firing a total clearance 117 break to take the third 117-0 and claiming the fourth 69-7.

Despite the loss, both Asif and Asjad, along with Mohammad Hasnain Akhtar, successfully qualified from the group stage for the knockout last 32 round.—Agencies

Ali gets maiden five-wicket haul for Faisalabad

LAHORE: The opening day of the penultimate round of the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy saw the top four teams — Sialkot, Karachi Blues, Faisalabad and Peshawar — being challenged but they showed their stronghold towards the close as a happening day one unfolded across five venues on Monday.

Faisalabad were 95 runs ahead of Abbottabad with eight wickets in hand in the second innings at stumps on an eventful 22-wicket opening day of their crucial fixture at the Marghzar Cricket Ground in Islamabad.

Abbottabad's Khalid Usman claimed seven wickets for 42 to dismiss Faisalabad for 121 after they opted to bat first. With Faisalabad, 81-9, No. 11 batter Jahandad Khan (31) hit four sixes to provide his team some consolation taking the score to triple-digit figures.

In reply, Abbottabad only managed a two-run lead, falling prey to Ali Asfand's maiden first-class five-wicket haul (5-31) and Hasan Raza's off-spin (4-36).

Shahzaib Khan (53) and No. 6 batter Ahmed Khan (31) did well to stall the imminent collapse with a 54-run fifth-wicket stand.

Faisalabad, in their second dig, lost two wickets for 29 runs before opener Faham-ul-Haq (37 not out) and Asfand (34 not out) — who was promoted up the order — took their team to stumps unscathed.

Asfand returned to competitive cricket exactly a year after appearing for Faisalabad in a Quaid Trophy game against Islamabad last year.

Lahore Whites were eight runs behind Bahawalpur in the first innings as they finished day one at 132-7 as Hussain Talat (58) and Ali Zaryab (39) chipped in with a 67-run stand at the Shoaib Akhtar Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi.

For Bahawalpur, Mohammad Junaid and Mohammad Imran picked up two wickets each. Earlier, Noman Ali's 4-51, skipper Aamir Jamal's 3-26 and Mohammad Abbas' 2-18 helped bundle out Bahawalpur for 140.

Karachi Blues had a productive opening day against Islamabad at the Diamond Cricket Ground in Islamabad as they replied with 294-6 to the latter's 161 all out.

Left-arm spinner Kashif Bhatti grabbed 5-61 as Islamabad slipped from 113-2 to 161 all out. Mohammad Asghar claimed 4-34.

Shamyl Hussain (85) and Hasan Nawaz (31) built a 96-run stand for the second wicket before Kashif and Asghar spun a web.

In response, openers Abdullah Fazal (73) and Saad Baig (46) provided Karachi Blues a head-start with a 116-run stand.

Blues faced a batting collapse of 6-82 as off-spinner Hasan took three for 58. At 198-6, skipper Saud Shakeel (88 not out) and Kashif (37 not out) formed an unbeaten 96-run stand finishing the day with a 133-run lead.

At the Imran Khan Cricket Stadium in Peshawar, Multan Region were left reeling at 27-5 at stumps in reply to Peshawar's 239 all out.

Twenty wickets fell in the fixture between Fata and Sialkot at the Abbottabad Cricket Stadium with spinners taking 15 of them.

Earlier, Peshawar were reduced to 43-5 and then 100-7 before No. 4 batter Abbas Ali and Sajid Khan (60) added 124 runs for the eighth wicket as Abbas struck (116) his maiden first-class century.

For Multan, Ali Usman (5-79) continued his fine form by picking up his seventh first-class five-for, fourth in the ongoing tournament and third on the trot. Mohammad Ismail and Kashif Ali picked up two wickets each.

Sialkot skipper Usama Mir (4-11), Hamza Nazar (2-14) and Mohammad Ali (2-16) dismissed Fata for 110 after they were 104-3 at one point.

In reply, Sialkot managed a valuable 76-run first-innings lead with only Mohsin Riaz crossing the 30-run mark while Fata skipper bagged his 16th first-class five-wicket haul (5-48). Azan Awais (29) and Mohammad Huraira (28) did well to give Sialkot a 52-run opening stand. At close of play, Fata were 10-0.—Agencies

US to face Argentina, Spain at United Cup

SYDNEY: Top seeds and two-time champions United States, spearheaded by Coco Gauff and Taylor Fritz, were drawn on Monday alongside Spain and Argentina for their defence of the mixed-teams United Cup in Australia.

Gauff and Fritz, ranked three and six in the world respectively, begin their 2026 season in Perth at the fourth edition of the tournament from Jan 2-11 ahead of the Australian Open.

Spain are led by Juame Munar and Jessica Bouzas Maneiro. World number one Carlos Alcaraz has opted instead to play an exhibition match in South Korea against Jannik Sinner in preparation for the season-opening Grand Slam.

Naomi Osaka will also start her campaign in Perth, lining up for Japan with Shintaro Mochizuki.

They were drawn in a tough group alongside Britain, headlined by Jack Draper and Emma Raducanu, and a Greek team featuring Stefanos Tsitsipas and Maria Sakkari.

Italy, France and Switzerland round out the Perth groupings.

Iga Swiatek and Hubert Hurkacz lead Poland's quest for revenge after being beaten by Team USA in the final in 2025 and Germany a year earlier.

They start in Sydney, pitted against Alexander Zverev's Germany and the Netherlands.

Alex de Minaur and Australia are in Group 'D' with Casper Ruud's Norway and a Czech Republic team boasting Jakub Mensik. Canada, Belgium and China round out the Sydney action.—AFP

Sinner caps eventful year with ATP Finals triumph over Alcaraz

TURIN: Italy's Jannik Sinner ended a turbulent season in the best possible fashion on Sunday, sending the Turin crowd wild as he battled past Spanish world number one and rival Carlos Alcaraz 7-6 (7/4), 7-5 to retain his ATP Finals title.

Sinner, backed by a raucous Italian crowd, fell to the floor after breaking his rival's serve in the final game before racing to celebrate with his team as chants of 'Ole, Ole, Ole, Sinner, Sinner' rang around the Inalpi Arena, adding the prestigious year-ending tournament to the Australian Open and a landmark triumph at Wimbledon this season.

The 24-year-old also bounced back from a three-month ban which chopped out a large chunk of his season despite the World Anti-Doping Agency accepting that the Italian was accidentally contaminated with banned substance clostebol last year.

ITALY'S Jannik Sinner lifts the trophy after beating Carlos Alcaraz of Spain in the ATP Finals decider at Palasport Olimpico.—AFP

"It's [an] amazing season... This year making four Grand Slam finals, coming here, winning here, having this big streak in end of the year, it's amazing," Sinner told reporters.

"But mostly I feel to be a better player than last year, I think this is the most important. It's all part of the process. I always say and believe that if you keep working and trying to be a better player, the results, they're going to come. This year it was like this."

Sinner has now won 31 straight matches on indoor hard courts, a run which stretches back to the 2023 championship match at the Inalpi Arena which he lost to Novak Djokovic.

Four more indoor wins would draw him level with Djokovic's tally set between 2012 and 2015 — the second-highest in the Open era but some way behind John McEnroe's record of 47.

He hasn't dropped a set at the Finals since losing that final to the Serb two years ago, and he was imperious over the week in northern Italy.

Sinner's win was his second over Alcaraz this year and a big moment after he lost the year-end world number one spot to the Spaniard, who won eight tournaments this year and took his Grand Slam tally to six.

Alcaraz was left to rue missed opportunities at key moments of a typically tight match between the two best players in the world, with his backhand failing him when he had chances to strike.

"Right now I have some points and some shots on my mind. For example, the backhand volley that I missed. I missed a few of the backhand volleys... which I'm really disappointed in," said Alcaraz.

"I would say that was the key because it was a really important moment that I didn't finish the point with the backhand volley... I think that was a really important shot that I didn't do well today. "

In a season defined and dominated by the rivalry between the two players, it seemed inevitable that they would meet in the title clash and both obliged by easing through the tournament unbeaten to set up one last dance in Turin.

It was an attritional affair, with each player rock-solid on serve until an enthralling tie-break at the end of the first set.

Sinner took the lead thanks to a brilliant lob which set up set point, and he made no mistake with a missile of a serve which Alcaraz could only limply send wide.

But Sinner immediately handed Alcaraz the advantage in the second set with two double-faults which helped hand his opponent a break of serve at the start of the frame.

Sinner hadn't dropped a service game in the whole tournament up to that point but he broke back in game six to put the crowd on their feet.

And Sinner collapsed to the ground in joy when Alcaraz sent a backhand wide on the first championship point, before heading into the stands to share his joy with his family amid the roars of the crowd.

"I was thinking about a lot and at the same time not a lot. There was a lot of tension because if I lost that point we go into a tie-break and then it becomes a different match," added Sinner.

"But in that moment I was probably more relieved about the end of the season. I had a similar feeling last year but it was different. This year it was a more powerful feeling for a variety of reasons. It was a really emotional moment."—Agencies